INL News Release
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Preparations for INL's 2009 fire season under way

IDAHO FALLS -- Firefighters at the U.S. Department of Energy's Idaho National Laboratory are preparing for the 2009 wildland fire season. Every spring, the INL Fire Department reviews its fire preparation procedures and lessons learned from previous fires. This information is used to protect Site workers, property and the environment from future wildland fires.

Fire danger on INL's 890 square miles of high desert land west of Idaho Falls is expected to become extreme as the grasses and sagebrush dry during the summer.

"A normal fire potential is predicted for INL this summer and, as usual, much of our fire activity will be dependent on summer weather patterns, most notably our lightning experience," said INL Fire Chief Eric Gosswiller. "I'm expecting fairly normal spring and early-summer growth with the rate of green-up and curing of fuels dependent on May and June weather patterns. Regardless of the conditions, we'll be prepared to respond to fires."

INL has an experienced and well-trained fire department that has proven itself during numerous wildland fires in the past. For example, a blaze in 2000 consumed more than 30,000 acres near the ATR Complex. The 2007 Twin Buttes fire was a large, challenging fire that burned 9,434 total acres. In 2008, INL responded to nine wildland fires involving more than 1,454 acres of INL land. Throughout this period, INL has experienced no significant facility damage.

Three fire stations are located at the INL Site, each equipped with wildland firefighting equipment. The fire department maintains four heavy wildland fire engines and a 2,000-gallon all-wheel-drive water tender. Heavy wildland firefighting units are outfitted with onboard compressed-air foam systems capable of making heavy, clinging or water-saturated foam that suppresses and blankets flames and protects exposures.

Additional heavy equipment, including bulldozers for fire line construction, is available from the INL fleet and subcontractors to support wildland firefighting. INL keeps at least 22 firefighting staff on duty at all times. If additional responders are needed, the fire department will recall off-duty employees to bring its force up to 75 qualified wildland firefighters.

If more equipment and/or workers are needed, INL has reciprocal firefighting agreements with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management; the cities of Idaho Falls, Blackfoot, Pocatello, Arco, Rexburg, American Falls, Chubbuck and Rigby; and fire protection districts in Shelley/Firth, Jefferson Central and Fort Hall.

Additional planned actions, as conditions warrant, to reduce the dangers of a wildland range fire this summer are:
• Aggressive vegetation control along facility perimeters and interconnecting roadways
• Wildland fire hazard and vegetation assessments
• Fire danger advisories to all INL employees about the high fire potential and precautions they need to take
• Fire restrictions regarding the use of off-road vehicles
• Constant "real-time" weather monitoring stations
• Heavy equipment (bulldozers, scrapers, water tenders, etc.) to be maintained in readiness for wildland fire response
• Heavy-equipment operators trained for wildland fire response
• Restrictions on hot work activities (welding, etc.) outside facility perimeters, and
• Maintaining defensible spaces around important structures and equipment.

INL's electrical power loop is redundant, so during wildland fires, power supplies are redirected and maintained. Major Site areas have emergency backup power supplies.

INL Emergency Operations Center in Idaho Falls and all major facilities at the Site maintain a fully trained and qualified response organization. Emergency control centers are located at each major facility. During a wildland fire, these groups are able to ensure timely communications with people at the scene of the blaze.

Risks to radiological facilities and important buildings at INL are manageable because of natural and constructed firebreaks, the predominant use of noncombustible construction materials, and the presence of reliable water supplies and automatic fire suppression systems at the Site.

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